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AUTHOR Davidson, Mary E.; And Others
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ABSTRACT

During the 1983-84 school year the Office of Equal Educational Opportunity (OEEO) of the Chicago (Illinois) Board of Education organized 11 Desegregation Town Meetings to enlist parents and citizens in carrying out a court-mandated school desegregation plan. The meetings provided the following information: (1) the priorities of the desegregation plan; (2) the functions of the OEEO; (3) the relationship of parents to the local schools; and (4) the allocation of OEEO funds. Each meeting included presentations on several of the following topics: (1) effective schools; (2) magnet schools/student transfers; (3) finance and budget; (4) bilingual education; (5) affirmative action; (6) special education; (7) the High School Renaissance Program; and (8) the Uniform Discipline Code. Audience size varied according to the location of the meeting, and the racial composition of the audience generally reflected the racial composition of the respective neighborhood. Questions and comments from the audiences reflected the problems of the particular districts. An observer who attended 10 of the 11 meetings reported that all of the panelists at all of the meetings were well-prepared and that informational packets were distributed at every meeting. Problems included the failure to provide a translator and information packets in Spanish at a meeting in a predominantly Hispanic American neighborhood, the inability of panelists to answer some questions, and the difficulty of drawing large audiences. Statistical data are presented in two tables. (FMW)

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Monitoring Commission for Desegregation Implementation

Occasional Paper Number One

THE TOWN MEETINGS

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September, 1984

Mary Davidson
Commission Lead Consultant

Leon D. Finney, Jr.
Commission Chairman

Ruth B. Love
General Superintendent of Schools
Chicago Public Schools

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LEAD CONSULTANT TO COMMISSION

Mary Davidson

Occasionally the Monitoring Commission will be publishing papers that do not constitute a Commission report with full documentation and formal recommendations. This format will be employed to release information, comment, or critique elements of the desegregation process. This first such paper presents information about the Desegregation Town Meetings organized by the Chicago Public Schools and offers brief comments about their organization, content, and effectiveness.

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I. INTRODUCTION

During the 1983-84 academic year the Office of Equal Educational Opportunity (OEEO) of the Chicago Board of Education organized 11 Desegregation Town Meetings to enlist parents and other interested citizens -- living in all of the 20 districts of the Chicago public schools -- in carrying out the intent of the Student Desegregation Plan. The purpose of the meetings was to increase public involvement in planning and implementing desegregation programs in order to maximize community support. This report provides information about the structure, attendance, and the substance of discussions at those meetings, based mainly on the observations of a Commission staff member who attended ten of the 11 meetings. At its conclusion the Commission offers a few comments on the information presented, without making formal recommendations.

II. BACKGROUND

Under the Consent Decree entered into between the United States Department of Justice and the Board of Education of the City of Chicago in September, 1980, the Board agreed to develop and implement a system-wide student desegregation Plan. According to Part II of the Plan, "Recommendations on Educational Components," success of the Plan's implementation and operation depends on community support, and community support depends on public involvement in planning and implementing the desegregation program. Given the large and diverse populations served by the Chicago public school system, mechanisms are needed to enable representatives of the Board of Education and the public to exchange information and opinions about progress in desegregation programs.

One such mechanism, organized by the coordinator of Community Involvement in OEEO, is the Town Meeting, intended to involve the public in every segment of the city. The Town Meetings were initiated at the beginning of the 1983-84 school year.

Town Meetings began in November, 1983, and ended for the academic year in June, 1984. They specifically tried to provide parents and interested citizens with information about

- (1) priorities of the Student Desegregation Plan for 1983-84,
- (2) the functions of the Office of Equal Educational Opportunity,
- (3) the relationship of parents to the local schools, and
- (4) allocation of OEEO funds.

III. ACHIEVEMENTS

A. Organization of Town Meetings

A staff person from the Office of Equal Educational Opportunity coordinated each of the 11 Town Meetings. A group of panelists, usually four to six employees of the Board of Education, presented information related to various components of the Student Desegregation Plan to those who attended.

Presentations by panelists focused on eight areas of the Plan: effective schools, magnet schools/student transfers, finance and budget, bilingual education, affirmative action, special education, the High School Renaissance Program, and the Uniform Discipline Code. Not all areas were covered at each meeting. The OEEO staff usually emphasized three or four topics in each presentation; questions varied with the concerns of those in attendance.

The school districts were clustered and a host school site was selected. The host sites were Lane Technical High School, Chicago Vocational High School, Clemente High School, Prosser Vocational High School, District 16 Office, Deneen Elementary School, Jones Metropolitan High School, Curie Metropolitan School of Arts, Whitney Young Academy and Metropolitan High School, Hyde Park Career Academy, and Calumet High School. (Please see Table 1 for identification of school districts and host schools.)

Table 1

Description Information Relevant To Desegregation Town Meetings, 1983-84

Date of Meeting	Host School	District	Number of Guest Speakers	Size of Audience	Racial/Ethnic Composition of Audience (In Percentages)				Racial/Ethnic Composition of Students in the School Districts (In Percentages)			
					Black	White	Hispanic	Other	Black	White	Hispanic	Other
11/30/83	Lane Tech	1,2,3a	8	50	4	8	16	0	26.0	40.0	22.0	12.0
12/13/83	CVS	18,19a,20	5	30	94	6	0	0	81.1	8.8	9.9	0.2
1/17/84	Clemente	5, 6a	6	50	10	16	74	0	22.6	11.4	64.9	1.1
2/15/84	Calumet	16a, 17	b	b	b	b	b	b	96.6	0.6	2.6	0.2
3/21/84	Prosser	4a, 7	5	72	56	27	17	0	67.8	20.4	10.4	1.4
3/27/84	District 16	16a	6	134	100	0	0	0	99.1	0.4	0.1	0.4
4/24/84	Deneen	17a	7	4	100	0	0	0	94.2	0.8	5.0	0.0
5/15/84	Jones	10, 11a	4	40	94	2	3	0	65.9	8.0	24.6	1.5
5/23/84	Curie	12a, 15	5	43	15	85	0	0	57.8	28.1	13.2	0.9
5/30/84	Whitney Young	8, 9a	4	4	25	75	0	0	58.9	8.9	31.5	0.7
6/12/84	Hyde Park	13, 14a	6	30	95	5	0	0	89.9	4.1	5.6	0.4

a District of host school

b Not attended

B. Number and Characteristics of Those Attending

Table 1 lists the dates of the meetings, the host schools, the districts served, the number of speakers, the size of the audiences, the racial/ethnic makeup of the audiences, and the racial/ethnic composition of the public school population in the districts.

Audience size varied from area to area. The largest audience was the approximately 134 persons attending the meeting at the District 16 Office; the smallest were at Deneen and Whitney Young -- four each. The racial or ethnic compositions of the audiences generally reflected the racial composition of their respective neighborhoods, although blacks and Hispanics were considerably underrepresented at Curie and Young and Hispanics at Jones as well. (The racial/ethnic classifications of those attending were made by the Commissions's staff member.) Overall, the audiences were relatively small, perhaps because 1983-84 was the first year of such meetings.

C. Content of Meetings

The questions and comments from the audiences indicated the problems of the particular districts. For example, Hispanics in Districts 3, 4, 5, and 6 complained about overcrowded schools and understaffed classrooms. Blacks were concerned about the lack of effective after-school programs, "good" teachers, and -- particularly -- about the lack of funds for their schools; most of their questions and

comments centered on those three issues. The comments by one of the predominantly white audiences (Curie Metropolitan High School of Arts) focused on saving money for the Board of Education and on concerns about the High School Renaissance Program.

Topics discussed at the meetings are summarized below.

1. Effective Schools

At seven of the ten meetings attended by staff, the Board presenters described the Chicago Effective Schools Project (CESP) and its expansion from 45 target schools to 62 schools (see Table 2). A report entitled "Design for the Chicago Effective Schools", which defines the project, was distributed at each meeting. The discussions often emphasized parent and community involvement. The Effective Schools Project subject usually consumed more time than any other subject because it is complex and many parents were not familiar with the program.

2. Options for Knowledge Programs

The magnet school/student transfer programs were discussed only at two of the ten meetings attended by Staff. At the first Town Meeting, held at Lane Technical High School, a panelist emphasized that the various programs are good ways to alleviate overcrowding and increase minority

TABLE 2
SUMMARY OF TOPICS COVERED AT DESEGREGATION TOWN MEETINGS, 1983-84

Date	School	Size of Audience	Topics Covered	Evaluation of Meeting
11/30/84	Lane Tech	50	Effective Schools Magnet Schools/Student Transfers Finance and Budget Bilingual Education	Good
12/13/83	CVS	30	Effective Schools Magnet Schools/Student Transfers Finance and Budget	Adequate to good
01/17/84	Clemente	50	Effective Schools Finance and Budget	Not Successful
02/15/84	Calumet	A	A	A
02/21/84	Prosser	72	Effective Schools Finance and Budget Bilingual Education	Adequate presentations, but lack of enthusiasm by attendees
03/27/84	District 16	134	Effective Schools Finance and Budget	NA
04/24/84	Deneen	4	Effective Schools Uniform Discipline Code	
05/15/84	Jones	40	Uniform Discipline Code High School Renaissance	
05/23/84	Curie	43	Effective Schools Finance and Budget High School Renaissance	Adequate
05/30/84	Young	4	High School Renaissance	More than adequate
06/12/84	Hyde Park	30	Effective Schools Parental Involvement	Adequate

A = Not Attended

participation in predominantly white schools. A pamphlet -- "Options for Knowledge" -- describing the various programs at selected public schools was distributed at every meeting, even if it was not discussed.

3. Funding

Finances and budgets were explained at every Town Meeting. The audiences at all meetings were very concerned about how money for desegregation was being spent. Appropriately, a "funding fact sheet", specifically detailing allocations, was issued at every meeting.

4. Bilingual Education

The Hispanic parents attending meetings at Lane Technical High School, Prosser Vocational High School, and Clemente High School were especially interested in bilingual education. OEEO's panelists did not make specific presentations on bilingual education, but audiences at three meetings expressed concerns about or commented on the program.

5. Discipline

The Uniform Discipline Code is a handbook that delineates the rules and regulations that students, parents, teachers, and administrators are asked to follow in the Chicago Public Schools. Information about the Code was presented at Deneen Elementary School and at Jones Metropolitan High School. The panelists at both schools used transparencies

on an overhead projector to highlight presentations. Also, at Jones Metropolitan High School a member of the audience commented on and questioned an aspect of the Code.

6. The High School Renaissance Program

This project, designed to help remedial high school students, was discussed briefly at Curie Metropolitan School of Arts and Jones Metropolitan High School, but received a lengthy explanation at the Whitney Young Academy and Metropolitan High School. The ultimate goal is to provide students with a well-balanced education with emphasis placed on mathematics, science, and foreign languages. Many questions were raised regarding this part of the High School Renaissance Program. The OEEO presenter urged acceleration of this program because 56.7 percent of freshmen in the Chicago Public Schools are in remedial mathematics classes and 50 percent are in remedial English classes. Those advocating the High School Renaissance Program said that the project may not be effective in its first years but expressed confidence that it will excel in subsequent years if given a chance. Opponents of this project argued that the program is ineffective because the students already are deficient in most academic subjects by the time they reach high school. They also contended that a similar program needs to be instituted for third or fourth graders so that these students will be better equipped to handle entry-level high school courses. The audience was told that a committee studies all

aspects of the High School Renaissance Program, analyzes its components, and provides recommendations about it to the Board of Education. That committee recently has recommended that high school graduation requirements be changed.

7. Other Topics

Affirmative Action and Special Education were not specifically addressed at any of the meetings. However, certain questions were related to these topics; panelists provided answers or directed the audience to other sources of information.

IV. MONITORING COMMISSION'S COMMENTS

At all of the Town Meetings the OEEO panelists/presenters, and the district superintendents, principals, and PTO representatives in attendance, were well prepared with organized presentations. Packets -- which included an agenda for the meeting, a fund "fact sheet", a list of the Effective Schools, an "Overview of the 1983-84 Priorities of the Desegregation Plan", an "Options for Knowledge" pamphlet, a copy of The Uniform Discipline Code, a "Design for the Chicago Effective Schools", a schedule of the meetings, and an evaluation sheet -- were distributed at each meeting.

One of the main purposes of the Town Meeting is to disseminate accurate information regarding the Student Desegregation Plan in order to alleviate any misconceptions the public may have about desegregation and its related components. The OEEO staff adequately provided such information. The difficulties that occurred at some of the meetings can be rectified with little effort.

A problem at one Town Meeting in a predominantly Hispanic district resulted from failure to provide an interpreter to translate English into Spanish. The parents and others at this particular meeting felt it was inappropriate to issue materials in English to an audience that mostly spoke Spanish. An argument ensued and a young man was asked to leave because of his boisterous demeanor.

OEEO panelists were well organized and familiar with their presentations. However, there were times when they

could not answer certain questions someone in the audience asked because no panelist was an expert in the area of the question. Often the person asking the question was directed to another source for information.

The audiences in the predominantly Hispanic districts always raised concerns about inferior education and overcrowded schools for their children. They contended that such problems have always existed and will continue to exist until drastic changes are made.

Drawing an audience of a substantial size -- one that would be an asset to the community as a whole -- was a chronic problem. Excepting meetings at the District 16 Office, with an audience of 134, and Prosser Vocational High School, with 72 in attendance, all Town Meetings had relatively small audiences. Lack of participation can defeat the main purpose of such meetings: to provide parents and interested citizens with information about the Student Desegregation Plan and efforts to implement it.

The Commission is not offering formal recommendations in regard to the Desegregation Town Meetings. It has no information available to it beyond that reported here. For example, the Commission does not know what panelists did to prepare themselves for questions that persons attending might ask, nor does it know what efforts were made to attract larger audiences. The Commission is sure that those

organizing the Town Meetings know that certain problems remain to be solved. We wish them success with the Town Meetings during the current school year.